

**Feminist perspectives on lesbian parenting: A Review of the literature
1972-2002
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Feminist perspectives on lesbian parenting: A Review of the literature 1972-2002

Abstract

This paper reviews the feminist literature on lesbian parenting published between 1972 and 2002. The paper provides a conventional survey of the themes and topics that inform the literature, as well as exploring – from a lesbian feminist perspective - what the literature reveals about the social/political history of lesbian parenting. Central themes include child custody and the politics of parenting as a lesbian: whether it constitutes a radical rebellion against patriarchy or a retrograde collusion with compulsory motherhood. The paper concludes by exploring how lesbian feminist writing on parenting has prioritised politics.

Feminist perspectives on lesbian parenting: A Review of the literature 1972-2002

Introduction

As Celia Kitzinger (1996) has pointed out, heterosexual feminists, including feminist psychologists, often engage in a 'carefully orchestrated display of ignorance about' (p. 130) research on lesbian mothers. She identifies the typical example of the book *Motherhood* (Phoenix et al., 1991), in which there is only one indexed reference to lesbian mothers that reads: 'there has been little research on lesbian mothers' (p. 227). This, as Kitzinger noted, is simply not true. As I will illustrate in this paper, there are a significant number of papers and books on lesbian parenting. Many of these were published prior to 1990 (probably when *Motherhood* would have gone to press), and some as early as the beginning of the 1970s (e.g., Goodman, 1973, Martin and Lyon, 1972). Research on motherhood within feminist psychology continues to be based almost exclusively on samples of (presumed) heterosexual women (e.g., articles by Reay [1998], Rúðólfssdóttir [2000], and Ulrich and Weatherall [2000], all published in the journal *Feminism & Psychology*). Even work on feminist mothers ignores or makes only token reference to lesbian parents. For example, Gordon's (1990) book on feminist mothers includes just two indexed references to lesbian mothers: a less than two page section on 'lesbian mothers', and a paragraph on lesbian mothers who are separatists. When lesbian mothers are the subject of inquiry, it is usually in the 'token lesbian chapter' (Kitzinger, 1996). Such chapters (sections, paragraphs, and sentences) on lesbian mothers usually appear under headings like 'diversity' (Knowles and Cole, 1990), 'nontraditional mothers' (Greene, 1990), and 'differing family circumstances' (Woollett and Phoenix, 1991). For these reasons, this review of the feminist literature on lesbian parenting concentrates on lesbian feminist perspectives.

Lesbian feminism is perhaps best thought of as an umbrella term for a number of different – and often conflicting and competing – feminist perspectives that centre on the lives and experiences of lesbians. As Blasius and Phelan (1997) outlined, lesbian feminism grew out of lesbians' disappointment and disillusionment both with gay liberation and with the women's movement in the early 1970s. Gay men proved to be no less sexist than heterosexual men and many feminist groups chased out lesbians or urged them to remain in the closet for the 'greater good' of the movement. Lesbian feminism combined the radical feminist claim that women's oppression is the primary form of oppression to which all other forms of

oppression are related (Crow, 2000) with an analysis of heterosexuality as the primary instrument of sex oppression (see, for example, Radicalesbians, 1970). This position developed over time to account more fully for other forms of oppression, and many lesbian feminists rejected the early privileging of sex oppression. Through the 1970s, lesbian feminist writers increasingly viewed lesbianism in terms of loving women in a range of ways rather than simply in terms of sexual desire (see Rich, 1980). 'Political lesbians' identified as lesbians as a form of feminist solidarity and a rebellion against patriarchy (see Kitzinger, 1987). Lesbian feminism increasingly came under fire in the 1980s, with some lesbians re-establishing former alliances with gay men, including especially lesbians involved in butch/femme relationships or S/M sexual radicalism. In many ways the theory and practice of lesbian feminism (and radical feminism) are unique to a particular time frame (Crow, 2000); however a number of feminist writers continue to strongly draw on lesbian and/or radical feminist perspectives (e.g., Jeffreys, 2003). The term lesbian feminism is now used to denote perspectives that range from experiential approaches that value and celebrate lesbians' lived experiences to more radical approaches that offer a political analysis of lesbian oppression drawing on concepts such as heteropatriarchy. Unsurprisingly perhaps, lesbian feminism is a *marginalised* perspective in both feminist psychology and LGBT psychology, and yet lesbian feminist writers have made significant contributions to both fields (see, for example, Clarke and Peel, 2004).

This is one of the first reviews of the feminist literature on lesbian parenting (see Beck, 1983, for an early review). In addition to providing a conventional survey of the themes and topics that inform the literature, this paper explores what the literature reveals about the social/political construction and history of lesbian parenting. Key concerns across the three decades include child custody and the politics of lesbian parenting.

Locating (and defining) the literature

Initially relevant literature was located by searching electronic databases and printed abstracts: PsycInfo; ASSIA Plus; BIDS IBSS (International Bibliography of the Social Sciences); Article1st; Contents1st; OCLC FirstSearch; Women's Studies Abstracts; Feminist Periodicals: A Current Listing of Contents; Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources; and New Books on Women and Feminism. Additional relevant literature was identified through the extensive bibliographies that are often included in books on lesbian and gay

parenting (e.g., Arnup, 1995) and on lesbian and gay parenting web sites (e.g., Lesbian Mothers Support Society [<http://www.lesbian.org/lesbian-moms/biblios.html>], and Lesbian Mother's Resource Page [<http://www.members.aol.com/Rrosechild/books.htm>]). The reference lists of all the books and articles found using these strategies were checked in order to identify further relevant literature. Although a thorough and systematic literature review was undertaken, because lesbian feminist writing is often located at the margins of academia (and more often in lesbian journals and community newsletters), the review also relied on more 'ad hoc' procedures including searching through the personal collections of feminist colleagues. The search for relevant literature was underpinned by a broad definition of lesbian feminism – including work published in lesbian/feminist journals and books, work written by writers who identify as lesbian feminists (or as lesbians), and work that emphasises 'lesbian-centred' perspectives (Rothblum, 2004) or that draws on lesbian feminist theories and concepts.

THE LESBIAN FEMINIST LITERATURE ON LESBIAN PARENTING IN THE 1970S

The lesbian feminist literature in the 1970s focused mainly on custody battles, and the likelihood of women losing custody if they 'decide to bear their souls and throw themselves on the mercy of our unmerciful courts' (Martin and Lyon, 1972, p. 153). Lesbian feminists were critical of the treatment meted out to lesbian parents in court: 'in every case what is actually on trial is the lesbianism of the mother, and in particular, whether her lesbianism will result in her children growing up to be "troublesome"' (Wyland, 1977, p. 14). They argued that the most effective weapon that could be used against a lesbian was taking away her children.

Lesbian feminists in the 1970s wrote about a number of other (lesbian-centred) topics including: what it is like being a lesbian parent (Abbitt and Bennett, 1979, Perreault, 1975), being the lover of a lesbian parent (Toder, 1979), and whether lesbian parenting is radical or retrograde, and the politics of parenting as a lesbian (Johnston, 1972). Alice, Gordon, Debbie and Mary (1973) claimed that 'it is a waste of time and energy' for lesbians to raise male children and that the lesbian 'who keeps a male children has placed herself in a contradiction analogous to that of the straight women' (p. 305). They saw 'childcare as an enormous drain of energy on our still embryonic movement... we see no need to add more children at this time' (p. 306). Wyland (1977), by contrast, argued that:

'far from being a source of strength to lesbian mothers, the "Separatists"' have urged lesbian women to acquiesce in the loss of our children, saying a "real" lesbian—a woman who boycotts men all the way—does not have or want to have children. A "real" lesbian will be especially loath to keep male children. With that idea of victory, who needs defeat? Some of us may *not* want children. But that choice and avoiding motherhood because it is "unlesbian" are two entirely different things!' (p. 24).

Lesbian feminists also wrote about the fact that 'there is no provision in this hetero-sexist society for the lesbian mother' (Martin and Lyon, 1972, p. 141). They engaged with issues such as feminist child rearing (Perreault, 1975) and coming out to children (Berzon, 1978). The literature included the perspectives of less privileged lesbian mothers, including third world lesbian mothers (Azalea, 1979/1980). Lesbian feminists offered advice to lesbian parents fighting custody battles (Stevens, 1978), to 'lesbians who are fully in touch with their gayness and who are contemplating having and/or raising children' (Sisley and Harris, 1977, p. 111), and on 'sharing you lesbian identity with your children' (Berzon, 1978). They addressed lesbians' *own* questions about parenting:

'do I tell my children, and if so, when and how? And what should my conduct toward my partner be in the children's presence... What if the kids in their innocence say something about "us" to the other kids and it becomes part of the neighbourhood gossip? What effect would that have on the children?' (Martin and Lyons, 1972, p. 157).

The message in the lesbian feminist literature of the 1970s was that many women were profoundly affected by mainstream concerns and questions about their parenting. Although the literature clearly affirmed the reality of lesbian parents, it also portrayed them as (justifiably) fearful of losing custody of their children, as extremely worried about the effects of their lesbianism on their children, and as greatly in need of reassurance. Berzon (1978), a lesbian therapist, describes a lesbian mother who sat in her office:

'shaking her head, saying over and over again, "I just can't. I just can't see any reason that makes sense for telling the children that I'm a lesbian..." How might it affect their own sexual identity? How would they feel about her? Whom might they tell? What kind of an experience would that be for them?' (p. 69).

In sum, in the 1970s, lesbian parenting was explored through personal stories

and experience. The lesbian feminist literature was responsive both to mainstream anxieties and to lesbians' own concerns about parenting. The 1970s witnessed the tentative emergence of the category 'lesbian parent'.

THE LESBIAN FEMINIST LITERATURE ON LESBIAN PARENTING IN THE 1980S

Overview

In the literature in the 1980s, many of the issues introduced by lesbian feminists in the 1970s were explored and debated in greater depth. Most of the literature addressed a wider audience of lesbians, only very few studies were written for an academic audience (e.g., DiLapi, 1989, Lewin, 1981, Lewin and Lyons, 1982). In the 1980s, child custody remained 'a central theme in the lives of lesbian mothers' (Lyons, 1985, p. 236) and in the lesbian feminist literature (Allen and Harne, 1988, Lyons, 1985, Pollack and Vaughn, 1987, Richardson, 1981, ROW, 1984, ROWLCG, 1986). Lesbian feminists explored the issue of custody in a number of ways. They published vivid personal accounts of fighting for custody of their children (see for example chapters in Pollack and Vaughn, 1987), and of choosing not to fight for custody (Pratt, 1980). They wrote (personal) histories of lesbian mother's struggles with the law (e.g., Allen and Harne, 1988). They gave advice to lesbian mothers fighting custody battles (e.g., ROW, 1984, ROWLCG, 1986), and they examined empirically the impact custody battles had on the lives of lesbian mothers (e.g., Lyons, 1985, ROW, 1984, ROWLCG, 1986). Richardson (1981) identified areas of judicial/public concern about lesbian parenting (which coalesced around the psychosexual development of their children), and argued that these were 'essentially moral concerns' (p. 158). The implicit morality of judicial/public anxieties about lesbian parenting was, she argued, reflected in the way psychologists chose to assess lesbians 'adequacy' (p. 158) as parents.

The 1980s literature, like the 1970s literature, explored 'life as a lesbian mother' (Anna, 1988, p. 253). It offered a more diverse and inclusive definition of lesbian parenthood (than that available in the psychological literature of the time) by exploring the experiences of mothers who leave their children (Pratt, 1980), and parenting (or not, Barrington, 1980) across the boundaries of 'race'/ethnicity (Herman, 1988/1995, Lorde, 1984/1987) and class (Herman, 1988/1995). Children of lesbians discussed their experiences of growing up in a lesbian family (in a heterosexist society) (Gantz, 1983). Lesbian feminists dealt with issues that were either strategically ignored or defensively denied in the psychological

literature (see Clarke, 2005). These included lesbian and gay children (Beck and Rachel, 1982/1990), heterosexual children's homophobia towards their parents (Pratt, 1980), and children's experiences of oppression (Lesbian Mothers Group, 1989). They approached issues that were addressed in the psychological literature from a more lesbian-centred perspective, such as lesbians raising sons (see chapters in Alpert, 1988). They also furnished a broader definition of lesbian parenting than that found in the psychological literature by attending to the phenomena of intentional or planned lesbian families (Alpert, 1988, Goodman, 1980, Pollack and Vaughn, 1987), and the growing numbers of lesbian co-parents (see chapters in Alpert, 1988, and Pollack and Vaughn, 1987).

The politics of parenting as a lesbian

As Kahn (1995) notes, the politics of parenting 'had become a divisive issue within the lesbian-feminist communities by the mid '80s' (p. 134), partly because of the ever increasing numbers of lesbians 'choosing children' and mothers identifying as lesbian. Women who had committed themselves to the lesbian community because it represented unconventional ('child-free') womanhood felt abandoned by sisters who appeared to be succumbing to the pronatalism of the 1980s by creating their own lesbian version of the nuclear family: two dykes and a tyke. Sheila Shulman (1986) wrote that she felt 'very angry, and felt deeply betrayed when suddenly all around me, many women, most of them lesbian feminists of one sort or another... are either trying to become pregnant or having babies' (p. 70). She argued that it is not possible for lesbians to make a positive choice to have a child. Lesbians who do not have children 'are less in collusion with false and inimical definitions' (p. 73) of what it means to be a woman. She felt that they are 'openly challenging the script, not producing a lesbian version of the script' (p. 73). 'Old' lesbian mothers who had felt unsupported and alienated within the lesbian feminist communities of the 1970s were angry that children were now *de rigueur*. For many other lesbians, however, choosing children represented a 'lesbian coming of age' (Kahn, 1995, p. 135): a sign that they had overcome the 'internalized homophobia' that led them to believe they could not be (good) mothers.

Radical or retrograde?

The key debate in the 1980s literature centres on the politics of parenting as a lesbian (Vaughn, 1987): whether lesbian parenting is radical or retrograde and lesbian mothers are "'proper" lesbians?' (Hanscombe and Forster, 1981, p. 39).

Writers explored whether lesbian parenting was politically reactionary serving only to assimilate lesbians into the mainstream and defusing the radical challenge of lesbianism, or whether it would transform the institution and practices of motherhood and the notion that lesbians are unfit to raise children. Some lesbian feminists claimed that lesbian parenting was retrograde. Lesbianism, they argued, does not transform the institution of motherhood, 'it is too loaded with this patriarchal history and function to be an entirely different phenomenon just because lesbians are doing it' (Polikoff, 1987, p. 54). Polikoff further argued that lesbians' personal decisions to have a child represent a retreat into private life and a rejection of lesbian political activism. Jo (1984/1988), in a paper addressed to women who call themselves lesbians and are thinking of getting pregnant, argued passionately that 'becoming a mother does *not* mean... that if you have a daughter she will become a Lesbian... that if you have a son he will be the exceptional non-sexist male' (p. 316). She also asserted that:

'becoming a mother *does* mean... that you are fulfilling a male-defined role of femininity and Motherhood... that you are most likely creating more heterosexuals... that *no matter what you do*, if you have a boy, he will terrorize and attack girls and later, adult women, and statistically will very likely be a rapist... that you will be playing with sperm, which is a heterosexual act (and offensive to most Lesbians)... that the process of being pregnant and giving birth is also a heterosexual act... Motherhood can be lethal' (pp. 316-317).

For Jo, and others, lesbians choosing to become mothers was ultimately a 'reactionary choice' (p. 316). Vaughn (1987) expressed concern about the 'romanticization of motherhood operating in the lesbian/women's community' (p. 22). Herman (1988/1995) similarly wondered whether lesbians 'are being affected by a heavy dose of "pronatalism", the ideology that woman's anatomy is woman's destiny, that being a mother, particularly a "birth-mother", is the quintessential, compulsory female experience' (pp. 151-152). Black and working class lesbians argued that equating lesbian motherhood with 'choices' (such as 'choosing' to have a daughter) conveniently side-steps the complex issues of 'race' and class: 'for women to "choose girls" is an extreme exercise of privilege and makes working-class women and women of color the grunts who raise boys and deal with sexism' (Susan Moir [undated], quoted in E. Herman, 1988/1995, p. 154).

By contrast, Copper (1987/1988) identified radical potential in the lesbian

mothering of daughters. For Copper, 'lesbian mothers are the only category of women sufficiently alienated from patriarchal tradition to sustain radical modification in the socialization of daughters' (p. 314). Some lesbian feminists made specific claims for the progressive potential of self-insemination as representing a 'radically different approach to the concept of parenting' (Klein, 1984, p. 384). They argued that self-insemination enabled lesbians to have a child on their own terms. They heralded consciously chosen lesbian families as attacking traditional notions of the family and dealing a blow to the power of fathers.

Separatism and raising boys

Debate in the literature in the 1980s also focused on the related issues of lesbian separatism and raising male children. Some lesbians were optimistic about the role of lesbian parents in helping to rear a new generation of non-oppressive men:

'the male child has every opportunity to take his place with the oppressor class. Without the influence of strong lesbian, feminist parents, he will surely take the place provided for him by his oppressor cousins... we must raise our sons, or the oppressor will surely steal their souls' (Rowen, 1981, pp. 98-99).

Other lesbians, however, were critical of such arguments. According to Lee (1983/1988), lesbians should not allow 'womon-only' space to be invaded by boy children:

'the belief that we are responsible for the behavior of male children avoids the reality that wimmin do not hold power in the boys' world. By inviting them into our spaces we perpetuate the historical, sexist pattern of assuming wimmin are responsible for something they have no power over' (p. 313).

Julia Penelope (1985/1986) accused lesbian mothers who raise sons of selling out. She argued that they destroyed 'Lesbian-only space' by demanding that their male children were admitted to 'wimmin-only' events 'claiming that, by excluding their male children, we were excluding THEM' (p. 23). For Penelope:

'whether or not a Lesbian mother leaves her male son at home isn't "the issue". The real issue is the fact that these wimmin are choosing to raise males, choosing to nurture them, choosing them instead of choosing

themselves and other wimmin' (p. 23).

Goodman (1980) assessed the impact of the gay liberation movement on two groups of lesbian mothers, one who emerged prior to the movement and who felt they had to 'go straight' (p. 157), and one who related to the feminist, gay and lesbian movements of the late sixties. Women in the second group were more likely to be upfront about their lesbianism and the advantages of the lesbian lifestyle with their children, and they were more likely to be active in the women's and gay movement. Women in the first group were more likely to remain closeted and not tell their children about their lesbianism, and to not be active in either the women's or the gay movement.

In the lesbian feminist literature in the 1980s motherhood emerged as an important focus for lesbian feminist writing. 'Lesbian mother' now existed as meaningful category and the literature no longer focused solely on experiences of oppression but also incorporated explorations of the ideological significance of lesbian parenting.

THE LESBIAN FEMINIST LITERATURE ON LESBIAN PARENTING IN THE 1990S/2000S

The progressive potential of lesbian families

Ellen Herman (1996) points out that one of the classic works of early lesbian feminism, Dolores Klaich's *Woman + Woman: Attitudes towards lesbianism* (1974), included only a single sentence on the 'special problems' of lesbian mothers and only one reference to the family which read: 'family, overthrowing of'. Lesbian parents are now the subjects of a mushrooming popular *and* academic lesbian feminist literature. The swell of interest in lesbian families and particularly in planned lesbian families reflects a shift in the politics of parenting within lesbian communities. The anti-family ethos of gay liberation, and lesbian feminists' call for women to overthrow the family and free themselves from compulsory motherhood, are now whispers from a distant past (Kahn, 1995). In the 1990s/2000s, lesbians demand the right to marry and social and political recognition for their chosen families. As Herman (1996) argues, 'few lesbians, it seems, are interested any longer in overthrowing the family, at least not the intergenerational one they imagine creating themselves through biological reproduction, co-parenting, adoption, or foster parenting' (p. 84). The question driving the feminist literature has, Herman argues, shifted from 'whether we will be "allowed" to retain custody of our children' (p. 84) to 'whether we will be able

to create stronger and better families than the ones in which we grew up ourselves' (p. 84). Lesbian feminist work overwhelmingly supports the progressive potential of lesbian families. Separatism and anti-family politics are rarely given serious consideration, in spite (and probably because) of the fact that they raise challenging questions for lesbians' choosing children.

Popular literature

A vast array of celebratory popular books about lesbian and gay families have been published in recent years. These books typically proclaim that 'love makes a family' (Kaeser and Gillespie, 1999); only one demands that straight society 'get used to it!' (Hauschild and Rosier, 1999). Popular books can be divided into a number of categories. First, there is the 'lesbian families' "handbook" industry' (Gabb, 2001, p. 323), a series of books (the first of which was published in the mid-1980s [Pies, 1985]) offering advice to lesbians (and gay men) on 'creating families and raising children' (Clunis and Green, 1995). Second, there are lavish "'coffee-table" portfolios' (Gabb, 1999, p. 16) that visually illustrate the lives of lesbian and gay families (Hauschild and Rosier, 1999, Kaiser and Gillespie, 1999). Third, there are autobiographical accounts of life as a lesbian parent (Abrams, 1999) and anthologies of writing by and about lesbian (and gay) families (Ali, 1996), some of which are organised around particular themes such as adoption and fostering (Hicks and McDermott, 1999), lesbians raising sons (Wells, 1997), and the experiences of children in lesbian and gay families (Howley and Samuels, 2000).

Academic literature – Planned lesbian families and intra-community battles

The flourishing academic literature on lesbian families covers a range of issues. With regard to the law and child custody, the consensus appears to be that while individual lesbians may still loose custody of their children (the highly publicised case of Sharon Bottoms for example, Gover, 1997), and 'the threat of a custody battle over the issues of sexual orientation remains a powerful one in the lives of *all* lesbian mothers' (Arnup and Boyd, 1995, p. 83), custody is now much more winnable and is no longer the urgent political issue that it once was (Donovan, 1997). Lesbian feminists now feel (politically) able to work on issues other than child custody. This means that custody battles between lesbians and their ex-spouses are now of lesser concern. They have been eclipsed by a focus on 'intracommunity' custody battles (Kendell, 1998) between lesbian and gay family

members (e.g., between lesbian mothers and sperm donors/fathers or between biological and social mothers) and other legal issues concerning planned lesbian families (Arnup, 1994), including fostering and adoption rights. Intracommunity custody battles, it is argued, raise fundamental questions about the nature of parenthood and the meaning of family (Kendell, 1998): do they, as Gavigan (1995) asks, 'entrench or undermine dominant notions of family' (p. 102)? Courts, in the US particularly (where there is a large number of planned lesbian families), struggle with custody and visitation disputes between formerly partnered lesbians who had children by donor insemination. In March 1997, Leanne Bueker filed for joint custody of her daughter (referred to as 'M'). Bueker split from her partner, Kelly Cunningham, the birth mother of their daughter M, in January 1997. Later that year a magistrate gave Cunningham temporary sole custody, but ordered visitation for Bueker. In October 1998, a judge issued a pioneering joint custody order. The order was upheld in another court hearing in August 1999 (NewsplanetStaff, 1999). Many other lesbian social parents have not been so fortunate (Robson, 1998). Morton (1998) notes that some lesbians have 'reacted with resentment and bitterness toward biological or adoptive mothers who are perceived as denying parental rights to their former partners, branding them as traitors in the battle to legitimize gay and lesbian families' (p. 415).

Outside of the law, most lesbian feminist work focuses on the experiences, fabric and progressive potential of planned lesbian families. Feminists use interviews (Ainslie and Feltey, 1991), ethnography (Lewin, 1993), qualitative questionnaires (Lott-Whitehead and Tully, 1993), psychoanalysis (de Kanter, 1993) and their own personal experience as members of lesbian families (Aronson, 1996) to explore 'creating lesbian families' (Conrad and Colwell, 1995, p. 149). Some work focuses specifically on the role and experiences of co-parents in planned lesbian families (Muzio, 1993). Livia (2000), for instance, discusses the pain of exclusion and invisibility as a non-biological parent. Work has also explored what happens when lesbian families break down. Morton (1998), in a paper on lesbian divorce, argues that 'as more lesbian couples are giving birth to and adopting children, the issues raised by divorce in the lesbian community are increasingly ones of parental status, child support, and child-sharing-issues that have profound consequences for the children as well the adults' (p. 414).

What about the children?

The 'worries, joys, strengths and longings' (O'Connell, 1993, p. 287) of children in lesbian families remains a focus for current work on lesbian families (e.g.,

Wright, 2001), including children's own reflections on their experiences (Paechter, 2000). Saffron (1998) outlines the 'advantages of having a lesbian mother' (p. 35) for children. She argues that given that most children will be heterosexual when they grow up, 'the greatest gift a lesbian mother can give is freedom from prejudice and from the fear of homosexuality' (p. 38). For lesbian, gay and bisexual children having an openly lesbian mother is a distinct advantage, making it easier for them to be comfortable with their sexuality. Children in lesbian families also gain a tangible sense of women's emotional and financial independence from men, they develop an understanding of family that challenges traditional understandings, and they learn to accept diversity.

Revisiting radical or retrograde

The 'lesbian baby boom' has provided a new impetus for the radical/retrograde debate that, as Herman (1996) noted, has 'gathered a lot of steam in the past few years' (p. 100):

'does the baby boom of the past decade indicate the success of gay liberation in increasing lesbian self-esteem and inaugurating an era of sexual and reproductive freedom? or does it indicate lesbian surrender to the rules and regulations of femininity, maternity being first among them?' (p. 84).

Arnup (1991) likewise noted that within the lesbian community lesbian parenting 'has created a storm of controversy' (p. 103). In responding to Nancy Polikoff's (1987) comments (see above), that lesbians' choice to parent represents a rejection of lesbian political activism, she argues that:

'such a view rests on an extremely narrow definition of "political work"... our alliances with heterosexual mothers may in fact help us to bring about social change. As our children come into contact with children of so-called normal families at day care and schools, they break down the artificial barriers between the heterosexual and lesbian worlds' (p. 103).

Sid (1993) noted the stigma attached to children in the lesbian community, 'many lesbian non-mothers say they dislike the *evidence* of our having had past sexual relations with men, i.e., *our children*' (p. 10). This used to be called 'carrying the male presence' (p. 10), as if, she argued, 'they could not look at a child without being assaulted by primal scenes of her conception' (p. 10).

Most lesbian feminist work in the 1990s supports the view that lesbian parenting

has radical potential. Herman (1996) is one of the few to argue that lesbian parenting is not:

'inherently revolutionary, or even feminist. It no more guarantees that lesbian-raised children will be the vanguard of the future social change than it condemns children growing up with a heterosexual parent or parents to a Barbie-and-Ken destiny... In many ways, being a non-mother remains the supreme mark of female deviance, always requiring painstaking explanation where maternal impulses seem entirely self-evident' (p. 103).

In the 1990s, the radical/retrograde debate recedes from the pages of community newsletters and movement publications and becomes instead a focus for academic work. Major research interests include: the domestic division of labour in lesbian families (Dunne, 1998); whether becoming mothers mainstreams or (further) marginalises lesbians (Dalton and Bielby, 2000); and questions about the 'redefinition of motherhood' and family in lesbian families (Morton, 1998, p. 410). Feminist sociological division of domestic labour studies, like psychological research in this area, typically find that a minority of lesbian couples' division of labour 'mimics modern heterosexual expectations' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 747), and a majority of couples pursue 'more egalitarian work and family arrangements' (p. 748). This leads, as it does within psychology, to extravagant claims about lesbian families 'undoing' gender' (Sullivan, 1996, p. 759) and being the families of the 'postmodern frontier' (p. 765). Lesbian academics who address their research to a more mainstream audience, argue that lesbian families can serve as role models of domestic equity for heterosexual couples (e.g., Dunne, 1998). Work on the mainstream/marginal debate typically suggests that lesbian motherhood represents both resistance and accommodation:

'though their lesbianism placed them at the social margin, motherhood moved some women back toward the centre. It allowed many individuals to rejoin their natal families and the cultural mainstream. This was a mixed blessing... the growing number of women choosing to mother was an indication of social progress; but at the same time this development risked reinforcing in a new form the old idea that womanhood and motherhood go together "naturally"' (Stein, 1997, pp. 134-135).

By the late 1990s, research on lesbian parenting had significantly matured. The dominant view is that lesbian families *are* reinventing the family, redefining family values, and transforming the meaning of parenting.

Conclusion

In conclusion then, lesbian feminist writing on parenting prioritises politics – both in terms of challenging and resisting the heteronormative social context and in terms of the meaning and significance of parenting for the lesbian community. Whereas, LGBT psychological research has focused on proving that lesbian families are just as good as – or more recently, better than – straight families (see Clarke, 2005), lesbian feminist work stems (unsurprisingly) from a more lesbian-centred agenda. This agenda is grounded in an assumption that lesbians are fit to parent and focuses on lesbians' lived experiences as parents and the broader significance of lesbian parenting.

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